

***JACQUES ELLUL, CHRISTIAN ANARCHIST***



Jacques Ellul, is primarily known as a Theologian. However, in 1988 he published a book entitled *Anarchie et Christianisme*, made available in the U.S. in 1991 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In this book, Ellul lays out his definition and understanding of Anarchism, and explains why he admires the likes of Bakunin and the 1880-1900 Anarcho-Syndicalists. While stating that he does not believe Anarchism to be a realistically attainable goal, Ellul considers Anarchism among the most admirable of goals.

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"With the verve and the gift of trenchant simplification to which we have been accustomed, Ellul lays bare the fallacy that Christianity should normally be the ally of civil authority."

- John Howard Yoder, The University of Notre Dame

Jacques Ellul blends politics, theology, history, and exposition in this analysis of the relationship between political anarchy and biblical faith. While he clarifies the views of each and how they can be related, his aim is not to proselytize either anarchists into Christianity or Christians into anarchy.

On the one hand, suggests Ellul anarchists need understand that much of their criticism of Christianity applies only to the form of religion that developed, not to biblical faith. Christians, on the other hand, need to look at the biblical texts and not reject anarchy as a political option, for it seems closest to biblical thinking.

After charting the background of his own interest in the subject, Ellul defines what he means by anarchy: the nonviolent repudiation of authority. He goes on to look at the Bible as the source of anarchy (in the sense of nondomination, not disorder), working through Old Testament history, Jesus' ministry, and finally the early church's view of power as reflected in the New Testament writings.

Jacques Ellul is professor emeritus of law and the sociology and history of institutions at the University of Bordeaux, France. He is the author of more than forty books, including *Jesus and Marx*, *The Subversion of Christianity*, *The Technological Bluff*, and *Reason for Being*.

## ***ANARCHY AND CHRISTIANITY BY JACQUES ELLUL***

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I have marked up part one of chapter one of this book. I have no plans to mark up more, as this book is very recent, and I believe the chapter I have marked up is the most important for Anarchists. If you are interested in the Biblical and Theological arguments Ellul develops, you should track down a copy of this book.

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## ANARCHY FROM A CHRISTIAN STANDPOINT

### ***1. What is Anarchy?***

There are different forms of anarchy and different currents in it. I must, first say very simply what anarchy I have in view. By anarchy I mean first an absolute rejection of violence. Hence I cannot accept either nihilists or anarchists who choose violence as a means of action. I certainly understand the resort to aggression, to violence. I recall passing the Paris Bourse some twenty years ago and saying to myself that a bomb ought to be placed under that building. It would not destroy capitalism but it would serve as a symbol and a warning. Not knowing anyone who could make a bomb, I took no action!

The resort to violence is explicable, I think, in three situations. First, we have the doctrine of the Russian nihilists that if action is taken systematically to kill those who hold power - the ministers, generals, and police chiefs - in the long run people will be so afraid to take office that the state will be decapitated and easy to pull down. We find something of the same orientation among modern terrorists. But this line of thinking greatly underestimates the ability of powerful organisms, as well as society, to resist and react.

Then there is despair when the solidity of the system is seen, when impotence is felt face-to-face with an increasingly conformist society, or an increasingly powerful administration, or an invincible economic system (who can arrest multinationals?), and violence is a kind of cry of despair, an ultimate act by which an effort is made to give public expression to one's disagreement and hatred of the oppression. It is our present despair which is crying aloud (J. Rictus). But it is also the confession that there is no other course of action and no reason to hope.

Finally, there is the offering of a symbol and a sign, to which I have alluded already. A warning is given that society is more fragile than is supposed and that secret forces are at work to undermine it.

No matter what the motivation, however, I am against violence and aggression. I am against it on two levels. The first is simply tactical. We have begun to see

that movements of nonviolence, when they are well managed (and this demands strong discipline and good strategy), are much more effective than violent movements (except when a true revolution is unleashed). We not only recall the success of Gandhi but nearer home it is also evident that Martin Luther King did much to advance the cause of American Blacks, whereas later movements, for example, the Black Muslims and Black Panthers, which wanted to make quicker headway by using all kinds of violence, not only gained nothing but even lost some of the gains made by King. Similarly, the violent movements in Berlin in 1956, then in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, all failed, but Lech Walesa, by imposing a strict discipline of nonviolence on his union, held his own against the Polish government. One of the sayings of the great union leaders of the years 1900-1910 was this: Strikes, yes, but violence, never. Finally, though this is debatable, the great Zulu chieftain in South Africa, Buthelezi, supports a strategy of total nonviolence as opposed to Mandela (of the Xhosa tribe), and by all accounts he could do infinitely more to end apartheid than will be achieved by the erratic violence (often between blacks) of the African National Congress. An authoritarian government can respond to violence only with violence.

My second reason is obviously a Christian one. Biblically, love is the way, not violence (in spite of the wars recounted in the Hebrew Bible [1], which I frankly confess to be most embarrassing). [2] Not using violence against those in power does not mean doing nothing. I will have to show that Christianity means a rejection of power and a fight against it. This was completely forgotten during the centuries of the alliance of throne and altar, the more so as the pope became a head of state, and often acted more as such than as head of the church. [3]

If I rule out violent anarchism, there remains pacifist, antinationalist, anticapitalist, moral, and antidemocratic anarchism (i.e., that which is hostile to the falsified democracy of bourgeois states). There remains the anarchism which acts by means of persuasion, by the creation of small groups and networks, denouncing falsehood and oppression, aiming at a true overturning of authorities of all kinds as people at the bottom speak and organize themselves. All this is very close to Bakunin.

But there is still the delicate point of participation in elections. Should anarchists vote? If so, should they form a party? For my part, like many anarchists, I think not. To vote is to take part in the organization of the false democracy that has been set up forcefully by the middle class. No matter whether one votes for the left or the right, the situation is the same. Again, to organize a party is necessarily to adopt a hierarchical structure and to wish to have a share in the exercise of power. We must never forget to what degree

the holding of political power corrupts. When the older socialists and unionists achieved power in France in 1900-1910, one might argue that they became the worst enemies of unionism. We have only to recall Clemenceau and Briand. This is why, in a movement that is very close to anarchy, that of ecologists, I am always opposed to political participation. I am totally hostile to the Greens movement, and in France we have seen very well what are the results of the political participation of the Ecolos (environmentalists) in elections. The movement has been split into several rival groups, three leaders have declared their hostility publicly, debates about false issues (e.g., of tactics) have clouded the true aims, money has been spent on electoral campaigns, and nothing has been gained. Indeed, the participation in elections has greatly reduced the influence of the movement. The political game can produce no important changes in our society and we must radically refuse to take part in it. Society is far too complex. Interests and structures are far too closely integrated into one another. We cannot hope to modify them by the political path. The example of multinationals is enough to show this. In view of global economic solidarity the left cannot change the economy of a country when it is in power. Those who say that a global revolution is needed if we are not simply to change the government are right.

But does that mean that we are not to act at all? This is what we constantly hear when we advance a radical thesis. As if the only mode of action were political! I believe that anarchy first implies conscientious objection - to everything that constitutes our capitalist (or degenerate socialist) and imperialistic society (whether it be bourgeois, communist, white, yellow, or black). Conscientious objection is objection not merely to military service but to all the demands and obligations imposed by our society: to taxes, to vaccination, to compulsory schooling, etc.

Naturally, I am in favor of education, but only if it is adapted to children and not obligatory when children are obviously not equipped to learn intellectual data. We ought to shape education according to the children's gifts.

As regards vaccination, I have in mind a remarkable instance. A friend of mine, a doctor of law, a licentiate in mathematics, and an anarchist (or very nearly so), decided on a real return to the land. In the harsh country of the Haut-Loire he bred cattle for ten years on the high plateau. But he objected - and this is the point of the story - to the compulsory vaccination of his cattle against hoof-and-mouth disease, reckoning that if he raised them carefully, and at a distance from any other herd, there was no danger of contracting the disease. This was when matters became interesting. Veterinary officers went after him and imposed a fine. He took the case to court, giving proof of the incompetence and accidents connected with vaccination. He lost at first, but on appeal, with

the help of reports from biologists and eminent veterinarians, he was triumphantly acquitted. This is a very good example of the way in which we can find a little free space in the tangle of regulations. But we have to want to do it, not dispersing our energies but attacking at a single point and winning by repulsing the administration and its rules.

We had a similar experience in our fight against the Aquitaine Coastal Commission. By enormous efforts we were able to block certain projects which would have been disastrous for the local people, but only after many court cases even at the highest levels. [4] Naturally, these are very small actions, but if we take on enough of them and are vigilant, we can check the omnipresence of the state, even though the "decentralization" noisily promoted by Defferre has made the defense of freedom much harder. For the enemy today is not the central state [5] but the omnipotence and omnipresence of administration. It is essential that we lodge objections to everything, and especially to the police and the deregulation of the judicial process. We must unmask the ideological falsehoods of the many powers, and especially we must show that the famous theory of the rule of law which lulls the democracies is a lie from beginning to end. The state does not respect its own rules. We must distrust all its offerings. We must always remember that when it pays, it calls the tune.

I recall the prevention clubs we founded in 1956 to deal with the maladjustment of young people. Our premise was that it was not the young people who were maladjusted but society itself. [6] So long as the clubs were financed in many different ways, including a subsidy, they went well and enjoyed great success, not adjusting young people to society but helping them to shape their own personalities and to replace destructive activities (drugs, etc.) with constructive and positive activities. But all that changed when the state took over the full financing, thinking under Mauroy, the minister, that it had itself invented the idea of prevention, and creating a National Council of Prevention, which was a disaster.

An important point which I must emphasize is that there have to be many efforts along the lines suggested. I have in mind one that is most important, namely, the objection to taxes. Naturally, if individual taxpayers decide not to pay their taxes, or not to pay the proportion that is devoted to military expenditures, this is no problem for the state. They are arrested and sentenced. In a matter of this kind, many people have to act together. If six thousand or twenty thousand taxpayers decide upon this type of action, the state is put in an awkward position, especially if the media are brought in. But to make this possible there has to be lengthy preparation: campaigns, conferences, tracts, etc.

More immediately practicable, though again requiring many participants, is the organizing of a school by parents on the margin of public education, though also of official private education. I have in mind a school which the parents themselves decide to organize, giving instruction in fields in which they are equipped and have authorization to teach. At the very least they might set up an alternative school like the Lycee de Saint-Nazaire started by the brother of Cohn Bendit. The most effective type is one that is run by true representatives of the interested parties: the students, the parents, and the teachers.

Whenever such ventures are made, they need to be organized apart from the political, financial, administrative, and legal authorities and on a purely individual basis. An amusing personal example comes from the war days when we were refugees in a rural area. After two years we had gained the confidence and friendship of the villagers. A strange development then took place. The inhabitants knew that I had studied law and they came to consult me and to ask me to solve disputes. I thus came to play the part of an advocate, a justice of the peace, and a notary. Of course, these unpaid services had no validity in the eyes of the law, but they had validity for the parties concerned. When I had people sign an agreement settling a dispute or solving a problem, they all regarded the signatures as no less binding and authoritative than if they were official.

Naturally, these modest examples of marginal actions which repudiate authority should not cause us to neglect the need for an ideological diffusion of anarchist thinking. I believe that our own age is favorable from this standpoint in view of the absolute vacuum in relevant political thinking. The liberals still think they are in the 19th century. The socialists have no real type of socialism to offer. The communists are merely ridiculous and have hardly yet emerged from post-Stalinism. The unions are interested only in defending their position. [7] In this vacuum anarchist thinking has its opportunity if it will modernize itself and draw support from existing embryonic groups such as the ecologists.

I am thus very close to one of the forms of anarchism, and I believe that the anarchist fight is a good one. What separates me, then, from the true anarchist? Apart from the religious problem, which we shall take up again at length, I think that the point of division is as follows. The true anarchist thinks that an anarchist society - with no state, no organization, no hierarchy, and no authorities - is possible, livable, and practicable. But I do not. In other words, I believe that the anarchist fight, the struggle for an anarchist society, is essential, but I also think that the realizing of such a society is impossible. Both these points need explanation. I will begin with the second.



In truth the vision or hope of a society with neither authorities nor institutions rests on the twofold conviction that people are by nature good and that society alone is corrupt. At the extreme we find such statements as this: The police provoke robbery; abolish the police and robbery will stop. That society does in fact play a big part in perverting, individuals seems sure enough to me. When there is excessive strictness, constraint, and repression, in one way or another people have to let off steam, often by violence and aggression. Today perversion in the West takes another form as well, namely, that of advertising, which promotes consumption (and robbery when people cannot afford things), also that of open pornography and violence in the media. The role of the media in the growth of delinquency and hatred of others is considerable. Nevertheless, society is not wholly responsible.

The drug policy in Holland offers an important illustration. Face-to-face with increasing drug traffic and drug use, the Dutch government opted in 1970 for a different policy from that found in other countries. To avoid the temptation of the forbidden fruit, drug use was legalized, and to check the sale of drugs the government opened centers where addicts could receive for nothing, and under medical supervision, the doses they needed. It was believed that this would halt the trade and all its evils (the bondage to dealers, the exorbitant prices, and crimes of violence to get the money). It was also believed that the craving for drugs would decline. But none of this happened. Amsterdam became the drug capital, and the center of the city holds a horrible concentration of addicts. Ending repression does not check human cravings. In spite of beliefs to the contrary, it is not a good thing.

My statement to this effect has no connection with the Christian idea of sin. Sin in effect exists only in relation to God. The mistake of centuries of Christianity has been to regard sin as a moral fault. Biblically this is not the case. Sin is a break with God and all that this entails. When I say that people are not good, I am not adopting a Christian or a moral standpoint. I am saying that their two great characteristics, no matter what their society or education, are covetousness and the desire for power. We find these traits always and everywhere. If, then, we give people complete freedom to choose, they will inevitably seek to dominate someone or something and they will inevitably covet what belongs to others, and a strange feature of covetousness is that it can never be assuaged or satisfied, for once one thing is acquired it directs its attention to something else. René Girard has fully shown what the implications of covetousness are. No society is possible among people who compete for power or who covet and find themselves coveting the same thing. As I see it, then, an ideal anarchist society can never be achieved.

It might be objected that people were originally good and that what we now see is the result of centuries of declension. My answer is that in this case we will have to allow for a transitional period, because tendencies which are so firmly rooted will not be eradicated in one generation. For how long, then, are we to retain the structures and the necessary authorities, hoping that they will adopt policies that are just and liberating and firm enough to direct us in the right path? Is our hope to be a withering away of the state? We already have experience of how this theory works out. Above all we have to remember that all power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This has been the experience of all millenarians and "cities of God," etc.

For my part, what seems to me to be just and possible is the creation of new institutions from the grass-roots level. The people can set up proper institutions (such as those indicated above) which will in fact replace the authorities and powers that have to be destroyed. As regards realization, then, my view is in effect close to that of the AnarchoSyndicalists of 1880-1900. Their belief was that working class organisms such as unions and labor halls should replace the institutions of the middle-class state. These were never to function in an authoritarian and hierarchical way but in a strictly democratic manner, and they would lead to federations, the federal bond being the only national bond.

We know, of course, what happened. At the beginning of the 1914 war the deliberate policy was to remove the better Anarcho-Syndicalists, and the union movement underwent a radical change with the appointment of permanent officials. That was the great mistake. At the same time the labor halls lost completely their original character as breeding grounds of a proletarian elite.

In sum, I have no faith in a pure anarchist society, but I do believe in the possibility of creating a new social model. The only thing is that we now have to begin afresh. The unions, the labor halls, decentralization, the federative system - all are gone. The perverse use that has been made of them has destroyed them. The matter is all the more urgent because all our political forms are exhausted and practically nonexistent. Our parliamentary and electoral system and our political parties are just as futile as dictatorships are intolerable. Nothing is left. And this nothing is increasingly aggressive, totalitarian, and omnipresent. Our experience today is the strange one of empty political institutions in which no one has any confidence any more, of a system of government which functions only in the interests of a political class, and at the same time of the almost infinite growth of power, authority, and social control which makes any one of our democracies a more authoritarian mechanism than the Napoleonic state.

This is the result of techniques. We cannot speak of a technocracy, for technicians are not formally in charge. Nevertheless, all the power of government derives from techniques, and behind the scenes technicians provide the inspiration and make things possible. There is no point here in discussing what everybody knows, namely, the growth of the state, of bureaucracy, of propaganda (disguised under the name of publicity or information), of conformity of an express policy of making us all producers and consumers, etc. To this development there is strictly no reply. No one even puts questions. [8] The churches have once again betrayed their mission. The parties play outdated games. It is in these circumstances that I regard anarchy as the only serious challenge, as the only means of achieving awareness, as the first active step.

When I talk of a serious challenge, the point is that in anarchy there is no possibility of a rerouting into a reinforcement of power. This took place in Marxism. The very idea of a dictatorship of the proletariat presupposed power over the rest of society. Nor is it simply a matter of the power of the majority over the minority instead of the reverse. The real question is that of the power of some people over others. Unfortunately, as I have said, I do not think that we can truly prevent this. But we can struggle against it. We can organize on the fringe. We can denounce not merely the abuses of power but power itself. But only anarchy says this and wants it.

In my view, then, it is more necessary than ever to promote and extend the anarchist movement. Contrary to what is thought, it can gain a broader hearing than before. Most people, living heedlessly, tanning themselves, engaging in terrorism, or becoming TV slaves, ridicule political chatter and politics. They see that there is nothing to hope for from them. They are also exasperated by bureaucratic structures and administrative bickering. If we denounce such things, we gain the ear of a large public. In a word, the more the power of the state and bureaucracy grows, the more the affirmation of anarchy is necessary as the sole and last defense of the individual, that is, of humanity. Anarchy must regain its pungency and courage. It has a bright future before it. This is why I adopt it.

Footnotes:

1. I prefer this title to "Old Testament" so as to avoid the charge that Christians have annexed these books and deprived the Jewish people of what really belongs to them.
2. Cf. my *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (New York: Seabury, 1969).
3. We see the perversity of power from the fact that the pope was given a vast domain in order to free him from the political pressure exerted by kings, emperors, barons, etc., i.e., to ensure his independence, but the exact opposite was the result.
4. An interesting point here is that we forced the administration itself to act illegally. The method was simple. The administration began work outside the rules and had to justify itself by orders and decrees. Biasini, the director of the Commission, advanced the theory that once work has begun, even though irregularly and without a proper inquiry, etc., there is nothing more to be done. In other words, once the bulldozers set to work, there is no further recourse. This means a total regulation of citizens and an official authorization of illegality. Another example of the same kind is the building of the Ile de Re' bridge, which an administrative tribunal rejected but which is going on as if nothing had happened.
5. Disastrous though its role is! For an illuminating study cf. 1. J. Ledos, J. P. Jezequel, and P. Regnier, *Le gachis audiovisual* (Ed. Ouvrieres, 1987).
6. Cf. Y. Charrier and J. Ellul, *Jeunesse delinquante: Une experience en province* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1971).
7. We should not forget that on the plea of safeguarding employment they supported the folly of the Concorde and still justify the manufacture and export of armaments.
8. Except for a few scientists who see the dangers of science, and a few isolated figures like C. Castoriadis.